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CONCLUSION OF THE HIGH-LEVEL MINISTERIAL SEGMENT OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL (28-30 JUNE 1993)

Summary by Ambassador Juan Somavia, President of the Economic and Social Council

The high-level ministerial segment of the Economic and Social Council noted with appreciation the opening remarks and statement by the President, the statement of the Secretary-General and his report on the World Summit for Social Development.

The Council had an extremely rich debate with a large measure of convergence on the analysis and prognosis of the current world social situation as well as on the preparation of the World Summit for Social Development. The principal elements emerging from the discussions are summarized below:

Political support for the Summit

1. Strong and unanimous political support was expressed for the World Summit for Social Development. Its timing (March 1995), which would launch the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, following the end of the cold war and close to the dawn of a new century, was considered particularly opportune. It would deal with real, tangible and complex issues of deep political importance in all societies: increasing employment, reducing poverty and promoting social integration. These are all urgent needs. The Summit would be an historic opportunity for action to advance the goal of "better standards of living in larger freedom" promoted by the Charter of the United Nations.

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The Summit could help define a new vision of development for all societies focused on the needs of the people. It would be a challenging and difficult task.

The social crisis of the 1990s

2. Considerable attention was paid to the present world social situation. There was general recognition of a worldwide accentuation of social problems. The social crisis of the 1990s was seen to be the result of growing poverty worldwide, particularly in developing countries, generalized spread of unemployment and different expressions of social uneasiness. Social tensions had given rise to internal political instability in many countries and posed potential threats to international peace and security. Unequal development was seen to persist. Deprivation and exclusion were seen as central issues for the Summit. Distribution of wealth and opportunities had become more concentrated. The excluded and the deprived could only be ignored at great peril to the cohesion of the civil society. Social uncertainties at home fostered international migrations. Developed countries had more means to deal with the social crisis than had developing countries, yet all societies were deeply affected by it.

3. The considerable efforts being made by all countries and the United Nations system to address these problems were recognized. It was noted that many successes had been achieved although there had been setbacks as well. The need to share experiences in order to learn from both successes and setbacks was emphasized. Such sharing of experience was seen as an important avenue of productive international cooperation. The preparatory process of the Summit should be organized to promote such cooperation.

New directions in social policies

4. In the light of recent experience, important questions were raised about the efficacy of traditional solutions and approaches. All countries needed new directions in social policies. In developing countries, structural adjustment, though necessary, was seen to carry too high a human cost. The progress achieved in recent years in integrating the social dimension into adjustment programmes was welcomed and the need to achieve much more rapid advance in that direction was stressed. In the transition economies, the problems and difficulties generated in the life of the people by systemic change needed to be addressed by appropriate social policies. In developed countries, slowdown of growth and growth without employment had put great strains on the social welfare systems which had generated "inward-looking" tendencies. Policies that acknowledged the interrelationship between these different problems in a global perspective and fostered equilibrated solutions of interest for all societies were needed. In particular, the need to address the problems arising out of unchecked population growth through agreed global strategies was highlighted.

Putting people first

5. The question of the philosophy and outlook that should underlie new approaches to addressing the social crisis of the 1990s was raised. It was stressed that the spread of poverty, both material and spiritual, called for a

global response. The poverty of indifference and of values should also be taken into account in devising such a response. The sense of insecurity and uncertainty created worldwide by the social crisis suggested a re-examination of material values that had become prevalent and a new vision of human needs. There was general consensus that development and international cooperation should "put people first". This implied a real political commitment to democratic and open systems of governance, respect for human rights in all their manifestations, including rights of workers and the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. It also involved bringing decision-making closer to the people, especially those who are excluded. Another aspect of values was solidarity within and among nations. This implied a fairer distribution of wealth and incomes, investment in people and a priority for human development in all societies.

An integrated approach

6. Piecemeal policies did not work. The need for an integrated approach bringing together the political, economic, social and environmental dimensions was widely stressed. It was recognized that vigorous economic growth was essential to alleviate and reduce poverty and generate productive employment. Policies for sustainable growth of the global economy were indispensable to address social problems. To this end, a better understanding of the present workings of international economic and trade systems was necessary. Growth was not an end in itself but an instrument for improving the living conditions of the people. There was a need for a balance between economic efficiency and social justice. Social expenditures should be seen as a precondition of economic efficiency and competitiveness. Investment in human resources made good economic sense. This implied a higher priority for creating social infrastructure and providing equal opportunities to all and the protection of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, namely, children, the elderly and handicapped persons. The role of women was seen as critical in economic and social development and, in particular, for social integration of societies. Strong support was expressed for investment in women to reverse the trends of feminization of poverty and unemployment, to address gender discrimination and to enable them to play their full part in socio-economic development. Investment in women leads to a catalytic and multiplier effect throughout the family, work and social structures.

Role of the State and the market

7. The complementary role of the State and the functioning of the market to put people first was highlighted. The welfare functions of the State, particularly in favour of vulnerable groups, were seen as essential. In addition, the State had a catalytic and facilitating role in creating the conditions for addressing the problems of poverty, unemployment, social integration and sustainable development. At the same time, the essential function of the market and private investment for an efficient allocation of resources and the creation of wealth was generally accepted. Creative ways could be found to address the interaction between the social function of the State, market responses to social demands and the imperatives of sustainable development. There was a clear preference for a pragmatic search for solutions without preconceived ideological notions. The best ideas and the most successful experiences were needed.

Outcome of the Summit - an "Agenda for People"

8. With regard to the outcome of the Summit convened at the level of heads of State and Government, the need for specific, concrete and practical results was emphasized. A number of orientations were identified, including the idea of an "Agenda for People" setting out principles, responsibilities and actions for social development around the world. There should be agreement on a list of specific steps to make multilateral cooperation more effective and give social development a central international role. A common and coherent concept of social development was needed, expressing agreement on some basic social standards to be pursued. The Charter goal of "higher standards of living in larger freedom" could become the organizing principle of the Summit. This implied a reorientation of national and international policies and new forms of international cooperation with agreed goals and agreements on specific actions for their realization. The Summit could adopt a political declaration defining the critical nature of the social crisis together with a global strategy and a plan of action for translating shared values into practical and doable programmes and commitments. The plan of action should unfold over time with short-, medium- and longer-term goals and should not be overloaded. It should be seen as a point of departure for concerted initiatives that would be implemented progressively. A consensus approach to the Summit was crucial.

National responsibilities

9. It was understood that the primary responsibility for social development rested at the national level. It was for each country to set its national social objectives. Common goals could be established recognizing that its implementation was specific to each society. No single social strategy or model of development could be applied to all countries. The need for sound macroeconomic management as well as effective and efficient social policies and well-targeted programmes for the excluded and disadvantaged was emphasized. The adoption of employment-intensive development strategies could generate productive employment which in turn would help reduce poverty and contribute to social cohesion. Employment should become a central objective of investment. Education, skill training and health policies upgraded human capacities and productivity. It was necessary to combine labour market flexibility with adequate social protection, retraining and respect for workers' rights in the process of structural change. An effort to identify new sources of employment and innovative ways of distributing available jobs was necessary. The questions of income distribution and linkages between sustainable development, social progress and good governance would have to be addressed. The adequacy of traditional growth and consumption patterns to solve contemporary problems should be looked into. In developed countries, structural adjustment with a human face was needed not only for domestic reasons but also as a contribution to creating a stable, growth-oriented and sustainable world economy.

International support

10. It was recognized that national efforts at promoting social development should be supported by enhanced international cooperation. A favourable external environment was considered necessary for the success of national policies. In this regard, the problems of the weakest members of the international community, particularly Africa and the least developed countries, required special attention. Greater international action was needed to ensure better access to markets, enhanced financial flows, the alleviation of debt burdens and access to technology. Complementary support was crucial in preserving the democratization and economic reforms undertaken by developing and transition countries. The positive steps taken by the international financial institutions in paying greater attention to the social dimension were recognized and they were encouraged to take further steps to support adjustment strategies with lower social costs.

11. It was noted that in preparation for the Summit it would be necessary to take into account the social problems of the countries in transition as the efficient solution of their problems was important both for the success of the economic reform in these countries and for the prospects of establishing a dynamic, balanced and open world economy.

Resources

12. The question of resources was viewed as a complex one. There was a general awareness of financial constraints faced by all countries. The mobilization and reallocation of resources towards social development were none the less seen as critical to success. A major shift of resources in favour of social progress through sound and balanced policies was considered necessary at both the national and international levels. A whole array of actions could be taken to mobilize resources, both financial and human. A reduction in budget deficits in industrialized countries could help lower international interest rates and spur economic growth. A reduction in military expenditures and their allocation to productive sectors was also suggested. The poor were seen as an important resource which could be tapped by labour- and employment-intensive development strategies. Private resources and voluntary activities could play a major role. An open-minded and creative attitude towards resource issues was needed.

The role of the United Nations system

13. The United Nations system was unanimously recognized as a key instrument for promoting greater understanding and consensus among nations. The system could serve as a catalyst for cooperation and as a source of financial and technical assistance to developing countries for achieving their national objectives in the economic and social fields. In view of its comparative advantage in the social area, the family of specialized agencies and programmes could serve as a social pillar of international cooperation. While the vast array of activities carried out in the United Nations system in the social field was recognized, there was a widely shared view that these were

fragmented and needed greater coherence and effectiveness. The system could provide conceptual and analytical support by developing an integrated framework of common goals and strategies. The need was stressed for closer cooperation between the United Nations and its specialized agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions. In this context, it was suggested that closer relations should be established between the Economic and Social Council and the Development Committee. The role of the International Labour Organisation in the social field was considered critical in view of its mandate in the area of employment and the tripartite approach. The other agencies could also play a very important role in their areas of responsibility: among them, health, education, women, narcotics addiction, habitat, nutrition, children, indigenous people, the disabled, the handicapped, the elderly and disadvantaged sectors in general. Greater regional specificity of social issues should be analysed through the regional commissions of the United Nations system. Regional meetings as part of the preparatory process should be considered. The Summit was a central political event in a series of important international gatherings organized by the United Nations, including the Rio Summit and the conferences on human rights, population and development and women and development, all of them highly relevant to social issues.

14. It was recognized that the securing of durable international peace and security required the underpinning of economic and social progress. The United Nations must accord equal attention to both. It was suggested that the emerging concept of people's security or human security should be analysed in the framework of the Summit. Preventive efforts in the area of peace and security should be complemented by similar efforts in the socio-economic fields. A proposal was made that the Economic and Social Council and the Security Council should meet jointly every year to address this issue. This should be without prejudice to the mandates of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council.

15. The Preparatory Committee for the World Summit for Social Development had a central responsibility in finding common grounds of analysis and fostering a spirit of consensus. It should draw away from bureaucratic negotiating styles and develop a policy, action-oriented format to address issues and maximize the potential for agreement. Its methods of work should reflect the political significance of dealing with matters of such vital human importance.

Participation of civil society

16. The role of social actors such as political parties, trade union organizations, business groups, religious denominations, the media, academic circles, voluntary organizations and non-governmental organizations in general was seen as an important component of the effort to promote social development and build civil society through a participatory process. Such social actors were seen not only as part of the process but also as part of the solution and the implementation of the Summit's results. It was important to tap their ideas and be open to proposals coming from them in the preparation for the Summit. Their active involvement would enrich the results.

Multilateral cooperation and political leadership

17. The danger that a continuation of the social crisis could lead to unilateral or closed regional actions was highlighted. Such an approach, which did not work in the 1930s, had even less chance of being successful in the global and interdependent world of the 1990s. There was no real substitute for multilateral cooperation. It was a collective responsibility to make it work. It would be necessary for all countries to marshal the political will for genuine international cooperation for addressing the core issues of the Summit. In the framework of present uncertainties people needed a sense of direction. It was the task of political leadership to explain the need for international coordination and cooperation. The early involvement of heads of State and Government in the preparatory process was essential. Supportive public opinion was crucial to the success of the Summit. The Secretary-General of the United Nations had a major leading role to play in marshalling public awareness of and commitment to the World Summit for Social Development.